

PROTECT SMALL RURAL POST OFFICES

Comments on RAO Initiative N2011-1
September 21, 2011

Small rural post offices have unique characteristics which warrant different considerations from those rendered to larger and urban post offices. Rural communities often do not have their own amenities that are standard for larger communities such as fire, emergency, and law enforcement agencies. Residents in rural areas often do not have other modern conveniences such as high speed internet access or local governance to the same degree of availability as larger and urban communities. Residents in small rural areas often do not have neighbors in close proximity such as residents in larger and urban areas. Rural areas are often categorized with descriptive terms such as widespread, extensive, stretched out, spacious, agricultural, remote, solitude, isolated, or expansive. Small rural communities sometimes are not incorporated communities which have services typical of larger and urban areas.

The attributes of small rural post offices vary across the country in terms of community description, geographical distribution of residents, socio-economic characteristics, crime protection, emergency response time, work and retirement data, types of businesses, and other variables which provide complete characterization of such communities. The needs of residents in small rural communities vary as much as the characteristics vary. In many rural communities, the post office serves as the central location, the pivotal point from which the community extends outward and beyond. Rural post offices in small communities often serve as the one public gathering place for daily interaction with neighbors, for discussions about issues currently impacting the community at large, or for impromptu responses to urgent matters such as wildfires, tornado damage, flooding, or neighbors in difficulty. In some areas, small rural post offices have bulletin boards which inform, announce, advertise, or promote important events. Rural residents have an opportunity to discuss daily life when visiting the post office for retrieving mail or obtaining postal service. While mail retrieval might be the primary purpose for traveling to the post office, a secondary purpose is for interaction with other residents ...an opportunity which may be of great importance in sustaining the very existence of the community.

The United States Postal Service has admitted to the American public that their service providing institution is greatly suffering from financial decline. Various reports have emerged which have identified reasons for USPS financial decline such as nationwide decline in mail volume, decreased customer demand, decreases in corresponding sales of stamps, postage, and packaging supplies, low workload and increased office expenses as a result of low workload efficiency, substantial increases in the costs of benefit packages for professional postal workers, and competition from package delivery companies which seem to deliver in less expensive and more efficient manner. The United States Postal Service has provided refined statements regarding the nationwide financial difficulty in responses such as "Like so many businesses today, the Postal Service is experiencing significant financial challenges related to declining

mail volumes and revenue.” The United States Postal Service has created and implemented a strategy to counteract the nationwide decline in mail volume and revenue. The official USPS response is entitled RAO Initiative N2011-1 or Retail Access Optimization Initiative N2011-1. Unfortunately, small rural post offices are being discontinued and studied for discontinuance within the USPS strategic plan to respond to declines in mail volume and revenue. This action is inappropriate for alleviating the financial problems of the United States Postal Service.

While it is true that the USPS is suffering financially, can it be true that small rural post offices are the cause of such decline in mail volume and revenue? Do small rural post offices actually lose significant amounts of revenue, require extensive expenditures in the daily process of delivery of mail, or provide substantial amounts of benefit payments to postal workers to truthfully be held responsible for the large USPS deficit? Has the financial problem been delineated to warrant discontinuance of so many small rural post offices? Can USPS substantiate that discontinuance of small rural post offices will alleviate the financial difficulties of their organization? These are very serious questions which have not adequately been answered. There are small rural post offices which have shown significant increases in revenue and yet, those post offices have been identified for discontinuance study. Is it appropriate for USPS to alleviate rural post offices which have shown revenue increases? Is it appropriate for USPS to expend hours, money, and work force for the purposes of finding ways to eliminate successful small rural post offices? Various news media sources have reported that small rural post offices have contributed less than one percent to the overall United States Postal Service deficit. Some reports have mentioned that the actual budgetary expenditures attributable to small rural post offices across the nation is just seven tenths of one percent. If small rural post offices have contributed to less than one percent of the deficit, why has the United States Postal Service targeted small rural post offices which are not the cause of the greater deficits which have impacted postal service? Should USPS focus their attention on other costly expenditures and larger post offices which do significantly contribute to declines in revenue. One does not stop a wildfire by extinguishing a single small ember, but rather, the larger flames must be addressed and extinguished.

American citizens in small rural communities across the United States are being subjected to needless discontinuance of their much needed post offices. The United States Postal Service is currently evaluating many small rural post offices for potential discontinuance. The well defined procedures which must be followed by USPS for such discontinuance feasibility studies require postal service employees to devote much time to fact gathering, data accumulation, revenue/expense calculations, workload assessment, conducting community meetings, responding to community concerns and comments, and verifying postal service records which have been submitted by USPS managers/officials in haste and in response to USPS directives which require prompt action. It is very unfortunate that USPS officials have been given responsibility for assessing small rural post offices within their respective jurisdictions when the overall USPS deficit cannot be shown to having been caused by small rural post office declines in revenue, mail volume, or customer demand. This is particularly true when Area

Managers, District Managers, and other District Officials have no true knowledge about the communities for which they have been directed to provide substantiation for discontinuance. The discontinuance process requires costly investigation, time consuming accumulation of facts, time expenditures for answering consumer questions and concerns, and takes professional postal employees away from their primary responsibilities of providing postal service. Residents in those communities which are being studied are given opportunities to ask questions, provide comments, respond to questionnaires, and make suggestions, but each and every input must have a response from an official USPS representative. The financial costs and time costs for doing such could very well be contributing to the problem, rather than helping.

If the United States Postal Service truly wants to receive and respond to input from the American public and from residents in small rural communities which have been targeted for discontinuance of their post offices, then USPS owes the American Public and rural residents truthful answers and responses which focus on the actual input received rather than to insufficiently provide standardized paragraph responses which inappropriately and simply state that the United States Postal Service “is experiencing significant financial challenges related to declining mail volumes and revenue.” Why should citizens of this country be subjected to such inadequate responses when USPS has received specific questions relative to particular community needs and concerns? The United States Postal Service prior to RAO Initiative N2011-1 was greatly respected by the majority of residents in communities across this country. When insufficient or unrelated responses are given in answer to concerned citizens’ questions, comments, concerns, and suggestions, USPS is contributing to demise of its own institution and organization. Questions should be answered truthfully. Comments should be taken seriously. Concerns should be noted and given careful attention. Suggestions should be considered. To ask for input and not respond appropriately is demeaning. What has happened to the once strong and honest United States Postal Service? Why are questions asked by residents yet still unanswered by USPS officials?

Some small rural post offices have shown increases in revenue over the last few years. Some small rural post offices have shown increases in post office box rentals. Some small rural post offices have postal clerks who receive only hourly wages rather than complete employee benefit packages. Some small rural post offices are patronized by residents and customers who openly suggest and accept a reduction in hours of operation at the post office. Has USPS responded by making adjustments? Has USPS considered making changes which would improve workload efficiency immediately? Have Area and District Managers properly made recommendations for discontinuance based on true community facts and truthful financial and workload assessments? Have those officials properly handled requests for information and responses? Experiences in my small rural community suggest unprofessional USPS consideration having been given prior to recommendation for discontinuance and during the tedious discontinuance process currently impacting my community and my neighbors. While attention and response might be categorized as cordial, proper attention, care, and response do not seem to have been provided. This failure to respond appropriately, failure to give attention to immediate measures which could

benefit USPS, and failure to provide truthful rationale for discontinuance of a post office is of negative consequence on residents, postal employees, communities, and USPS.

Congress can intervene and provide help to USPS. Some legislators have already submitted supportive statements for continuance of their respective post offices in small rural communities. The United States Postal Service obviously needs help in focusing on the major causes of financial difficulty because small rural post offices are not the major causes. Alleviating small rural post offices will complicate problems for USPS. Residents in such communities will be given options such as drive to another community or have mail delivered to an unattended mail box on the roadside. Neither option is appropriate for reducing costs on the postal service. Each of those two options impose unnecessary negative impacts on rural residents who need post offices more than residents in larger cities and urban areas. Why impose difficulty on rural residents when the cause of the financial decline is not attributable to rural residents or their post offices? We all must consider negative impacts due to financial decline, but discontinuing small rural post offices is not the saving grace nor is it the answer to USPS financial decline. This nation and our legislators must protect small rural post offices and post offices which have shown increasing revenues. USPS must respond adequately and appropriately. End the needless attack on small rural post offices in communities which need post offices and which support post offices.

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